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C O N F I D E N T I A L PRAGUE 001174

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/NCE (TRATENSEK)

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [PGOV](#) [NATO](#) [EZ](#)
SUBJECT: CZECH GOVERNMENT FACES A FIRESTORM OF CRITICISM
AND ATTEMPTS TO CALM FEARS OF RUSSIA

REF: A. PRAGUE 1171

[1](#)B. PRAGUE 1160
[1](#)C. PRAGUE 1064
[1](#)D. PRAGUE 1154
[1](#)E. PRAGUE 999

Classified By: CDA MARY THOMPSON-JONES FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The friendly and positive atmosphere during the official meetings of Secretary of Defense Gates (SecDef) in Prague on October 23 has been overshadowed by a media firestorm sparked by the SecDef's comments regarding possible Russian access to MD sites, including the planned radar site in Brdy, that had been discussed in Moscow during the "2 plus 2" meetings, and in Brussels at the NAC. While the Czech government officials reacted calmly to the SecDef's briefing and only urged maximum coordination and information sharing going forward, the Czech media seized on the alarmist vision of Russian soldiers on Czech soil. The media has also played up the criticism directed at the Topolanek government for allowing the United States and Russia to negotiate "o nas bez nas" ("about us, without us"), a reference to the Munich Agreement of 1938.

[1](#)2. (C) Summary Continued: It is too early to judge whether the government's attempts to deflect the criticism and calm the visceral public reaction will be successful, but we saw the dynamic and substance of the MD public and political debate in the Czech Republic shift this week. MD opponents will undoubtedly seek to capitalize on the strong anti-Russian sentiments to boost the Czech public's opposition to the proposed radar. The political opposition will probably add the "we cannot allow the Czech Republic to be an American-Russian pawn" to their arsenal of anti-MD arguments. End Summary.

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

[1](#)3. (C) As reported separately through OSD channels, the SecDef's Czech interlocutors did not raise alarm bells about the content of the "2 plus 2" or NAC discussions during the official meetings. President Klaus, Prime Minister Topolanek, and Minister of Defense Parkanova welcomed the SecDef's briefing and his assurances that nothing would be proposed to Russia without prior approval by the Czech government. President Klaus even went so far as to say that, in his opinion, a Russian presence would be "acceptable." The Czechs urged the U.S. side to remain in close contact and share as much information as possible regarding the ongoing discussions with Russia. Only during the meeting with the

parliamentarians did we get a hint of the neuralgic Czech public reaction that was to come, when the President of the Czech Senate, Premysl Sobotka, commented to Ambassador Graber that the Czech Parliament would never consent to Russian presence in the Czech Republic, given the country's historic experience. (Comment: We have been puzzled by this dissonance between the Czech government and public reactions, but it is possible that the Czech government simply did not think through how the "2 plus 2" and NAC discussions with Russia would appear to the public when distorted through the prism of screaming headlines. Moreover, local press reports on the NAC meetings in Brussels did not cause any stir, so it is understandable why Czech officials would have been unprepared for the reaction following the SecDef visit. End Comment.)

PUBLIC FEARS ERUPT

¶4. (C) The nuance and details of the SecDef's public statements during his press conference with PM Topolanek was lost on the Czech media, which has focused almost exclusively on the possibility that Russian soldiers would return to the Czech Republic, as well as on the Czech public and politicians' reactions to such an eventuality (refs A and B).

Predictably, in a country where memories of Nazi and Soviet occupation are never far below the surface, these reports touched a raw nerve. Indeed, among the frequently heard arguments against the U.S. radar proposal was opposition to the stationing of foreign soldiers, in this case Americans, on the Czech territory. (Note: This political sensitivity is the main reason why the Czechs have been adamant about a narrow scope of the SOFA being negotiated. Defense Minister Parkanova noted this in her meeting with the SecDef. See also ref C. End Note.) While some Czechs might be hesitant about American military presence, Russian military presence,

in whatever form, is simply a nonstarter for the vast majority of the Czech population.

GOVERNMENT UNDER ATTACK

¶5. (C) The media and a number of politicians from across the Czech political spectrum have also castigated the government for appearing uninformed about U.S. discussions with Russia that could eventually lead to a return of some Russian military presence to the Czech Republic. PM Topolanek's initial response during his press conference with the SecDef was a not very forceful "no comment." Since then, both Topolanek and DFM Pojar have sought to deflect this criticism, but with limited success. Czech history again comes into play here. Munich 1938 is among the most painful experiences in 20th century Czech history, and fears of great powers making decisions "o nas beznas" (about us, without us) were inevitably projected into this week's events. While the political opposition's criticism is to be expected, the suggestion of a Russian role at the radar site prompted a number of Topolanek's own ODS party colleagues to state that they would not vote for the radar if Russia were involved. Comments of politicians like Ondrej Liska of the Green Party are also troubling. Liska, who is among the most thoughtful and knowledgeable Greens when it comes to foreign policy and security issues, criticized the United States and Russia for negotiating "over our heads" and stated that rather than choosing between Washington or Moscow, he chooses Brussels. (Comment: We had hoped that with adequate NATO "cover" Liska and the Green Party's Chairman Bursik would be able to sell the radar proposal to their skeptical party colleagues and thus help the government during the parliamentary vote on the radar when every vote will count. We may have lost some ground with Liska and the Greens this week. End Comment)

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

¶6. (C) The Czech government has responded to the ensuing firestorm by stressing that the United States would make no

proposals prior to the Czech government's approval and by explaining that the efforts to increase the transparency of the MD system vis-a-vis Russia could take many forms and would not necessarily mean the presence of Russian troops in the Czech Republic. DFM Pojar told us that he spent four hours on the phone with journalists the day after the SecDef visit, focusing on the close and frequent communication between the Czech and U.S. government. However, Pojar said that there is only so much dancing around he could do without answering the crucial question of whether the Czech government was consulted prior to the "2 plus 2" talks.

COMMENT: A SHIFT IN THE MD DEBATE

17. (C) Already other issues are grabbing the headlines, and the story is moving to the editorial and op-ed pages. However, Russia's role in MD will remain a prominent facet of the debate here, if for no other reason than that the Czech anti-MD activists have seen their other arguments, especially those focused on health and environmental effects of the radar, successfully rebutted through the stepped up information campaign on the part of the U.S. and Czech governments. Before this week, the Czechs' strong anti-Russian sentiments played in our favor (refs D and E). Russian opposition to MD and the resulting threats to the Czech Republic and Poland were used by many pro-radar Czechs as justifications for their support of the radar and of tying the Czech Republic even more closely to its American ally. Unless carefully handled going forward, these anti-Russian sentiments could turn against us.

18. (C) Fortunately, the Topolanek government is now more seasoned and on a much more secure footing than just nine months ago when it came into power. We believe that the government will weather this storm and will remain committed to making the radar a reality in the Czech Republic. However, the government will need to restore the public's faith that the Czech Republic is an equal partner -- not a pawn -- in these negotiations. We can help through frequent consultations, supportive public statements, and clear, consistent messages from key U.S. policymakers. Building support for MD within NATO and helpful statements from other European MD partners will also go a long way toward dispelling public fears that the Czech Republic will be cut off from the rest of Europe and caught in the middle between

the United States and Russia.
ThompsonJones